

The Herald-Dispatch

LIFE: HOMES

Rita McGhee: Helpless families of hoarders are caught in the middle

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While most of us are able to keep our homes in order, others still need a little help -- or a lot of help. Hoarding can be one of the most hidden parts a person's life, except to our families. As the holidays approach, many of us make plans for the pilgrimage home knowing there's no room for us once we arrive. Families of hoarders suffer equal burden and are often caught in the middle of a long family battle.

Outwardly, a hoarder can be dressed well on the job, have a nice car, volunteer with charitable organizations and otherwise give the illusion that everything's normal at home. Upon stepping over their home's threshold, if they can even get the door open, a world of chaos and misery awaits. Stacks of unopened mail, half-completed crafts and projects, food that's expired, pet waste scattered in the corners, shopping bags of well-meaning gifts and supplies, boxes and shelves stacked high with "precious items," and home disrepair is a daily burden that the hoarder and their families bear.

This leaves families frustrated, confused and angry that the hoarder doesn't let them help undo the mess for holidays or anytime. Families pose questions like, "Why don't they just clean? Why do they keep bringing all this stuff in the house? How did it get this way?" The hoarder plays defense most of the time by making promises to clean as soon as they can find the time, planning activities for only outside of the home and limiting access of others to their private space.

A friend recently shared a story of a woman living nearby who would yell out the window if anyone stepped foot on her property or knocked on her door. She defended her property in such a way that would put Clint Eastwood's Gran Torino version of, "Get off my lawn," to shame. She guarded her secret closely, never letting anyone in her home. After several days of newspapers stacked up on her front porch, a brave neighbor knocked on her door to check on her, but was unsuccessful. Finally, the police were called and discovered, after wading through a shoulder-high maze of books and boxes, that she had been dead for nearly a week. This is a real nightmare that affects families of all walks of life.

Families of hoarders bounce back and forth between wanting to help, being told not to, and serving witness to the deplorable living conditions of their loved one. Very much like alcoholism, it's a long road through treatment and a daily battle to keep it from coming back.

It should be of comfort to know that all levels of clutter and hoarding can be helped, but not always in the way or as fast as "we" would like. Throwing things out in a hurried manner to "make the house pretty" is never the answer. Special items become lost forever, and the hoarder never learns how to change the behavior and habits that brought them to this point. Even worse, if the family secretly cleans the house, the hoarder may never trust them again. And, most likely, the house will return to its former clutter or become worse.

Some of the best techniques to helping a hoarder are simple. First of all, accept them as they are, and let them know it by calling and visiting often. The loneliness, and sometimes depression, of a hoarder runs deep. When the conversation turns toward the mess, and it will, ask the hoarder to describe what they envision their home to look like. Then, listen some more. This is not the time to share your opinion. If you're patient, they might allow you to help them with a small project that moves them toward making their vision come true.

Ideally, keep projects small and under 15 minutes to complete because the hoarder, most often, will become tired or agitated and stop the progress. For example, a project could be to get rid of some magazines. Try to separate that item from the hoarder by holding and handling it in your own hand, not theirs. And, remember to do so gently and without harsh opinions. Sit down and show one magazine to the hoarder, nine times out of 10 they will say, "They need to keep it to go through." Continue on and present a group of two or three magazines. Ask which ones they want to keep. Hopefully, they will allow one or more to be purged in the next few batches. Watch the clock and find a stopping point. There may be 1,000 magazines, but this is not the time to tackle them in entirety. Assure the hoarder that you will take the discarded magazines with you to recycle at a hospital or non-profit group for reading material. Make sure you do bring the magazines to their destination and tell the hoarder how excited the group was to receive them. Being genuine will build trust and allow more progress during future visits.

In the case that it becomes too much to handle for everyone involved, begin introducing other resources like counseling and a professional organizer who has experience with helping hoarders. The National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net) or Faithful Organizers (www.faithfulorganizers.com) can match you with a Certified Professional organizer in your area. The family doctor, counselor and minister are important resources as physical, mental and spiritual health play a large role in recovering from hoarding. In severe cases, Social Services may need to lend a hand with temporary or permanent housing solutions while the home undergoes cleaning and repairs.

Know that you are not alone. Several blogs and websites are available for additional support, and one of the best is the International OCD Foundation (www.ocdfoundation.org). It offers information

for both the family as well as the hoarder. The road to freedom from hoarding can be long and full of curves, but the destination is achievable and worth it.

The author, Rita McGhee, is a Certified Professional Organizer, owner of Sort My Space in Charleston, W.Va., and was recently the featured organizer on TLC Channel's "Hoarding: Buried Alive." She is the author of "Organize Your Home the Green Way." Contact her at 304-206-8144 or visit www.sortmyspace.com.